



healthsteps

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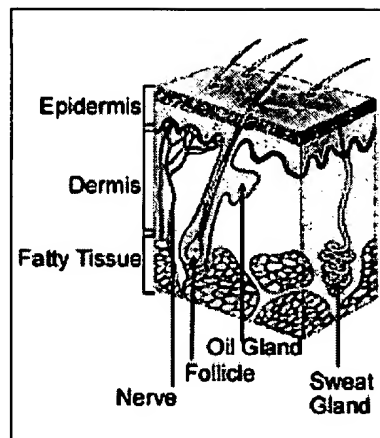
Skin Care: Age and Skin

The most noticeable thing that happens to our skin as we get older is wrinkling. But wrinkles aren't the only skin change brought on by aging. According to the National Institute on Aging, skin also gets thinner and drier as we age. It sweats less. It takes longer to heal from cuts.

There are also a number of highly visible changes. According to the American Academy of Dermatology, some of the signs of aging skin include:

- mottled hyperpigmentation (uneven discoloration)
- surface roughness
- fine wrinkles (disappear when stretched)
- coarse wrinkles (don't disappear when stretched)
- laxity (looseness)
- lentigines (liver spots) (Read about lentigines in "Skin Diseases and Conditions")
- sallowness (a pale yellowish color)
- telangiectasia (dilated blood vessels)
- tumors (benign and malignant growths)

Many of the changes can't be avoided. But proper skin care can make it easier to cope with the changes, and make a difference not only in how we look, but in how we feel.



Dry Skin

Taking too many hot baths and/or using strong soaps can make skin even drier than normal. Taking shorter baths and applying moisturizer right after a bath or shower can help. In fact, that's the best time to apply moisturizer. Moisturizers, applied while skin is still slightly damp, help seal water in. Dry skin can also be helped by a humidifier. In addition, the National Institutes of Health says oral hydration is also important and recommend people drink lots of fluids, especially water, to keep skin moist and healthy. Remember, though, that diseases or medications can also cause skin to dry out and/or get itchy, so if these steps don't relieve dry, itchy skin, talk to your doctor.

Serious Changes

A yearly check-up by your doctor can spot any serious skin problems. But you should also examine your own skin regularly. Any new growths, darkly colored spots or any changes in an existing mole, in its size or color for example, should be reported to your doctor.

The American Cancer Society says our risk of developing skin cancer increases as we age. The biggest culprit is sun exposure. People who live in sunny climates, who work outdoors, or who have a family history (Read about "Family Health History") of skin cancer are most at risk, as are fair-skinned individuals and blondes or redheads whose skin freckles or burns easily. According to the American Society of Pathologists, your risk is also higher if you overdo occasional sun exposure - as can happen, for example, when you go away for two weeks every year to the beach. (Read about "Skin Cancer" "Sunscreen")

In addition to increasing our risk of skin cancer, sun exposure also breaks down the elastin in our skin, causing it to sag. Although we can't undo the damage that's already happened, using proper sunscreen and avoiding excessive sun exposure, especially during the peak burning hours between 10 AM and 3 PM, can help keep skin in better shape, regardless of age.

Related Information:

[Skin Care](#)
[Shingles](#)

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[Back to TOP](#)

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[Table of
Contents](#)[Previous
Chapter](#)[Previous
page](#)[Next
page](#)[Next
Chapter](#)[Index](#)

4

Skin and aging

Nothing can alter the passage of time. But it is not just time that affects our skin. The age an individual *appears* to be depends on many factors. The genes are important, but even more crucial is the way the skin and body are treated throughout life. When we say some one is in the 'bloom of youth' it is usually because the skin exudes a certain kind of radiance and vitality. For most of us this tends to diminish naturally over time: from our skin's point of view at least, nothing is as good as pre-adolescence.

Scientists can explain this. What we call 'radiance' is a visual effect, mostly from the face, which implies a perfectly normal well-functioning skin. When the bloom fades it is because with age the skin begins to lose its ability to retain moisture. It becomes drier and more flaky, and shows the results of exposure to the environment, accumulated over many years.

If we say someone has 'good skin', it often means that that person

was lucky in the lottery of gene inheritance, has been able to protect and look after the skin well, and that it has not changed as much since childhood as has that of others.

In former times only the 'idle rich' could concentrate on caring for their skins. Until this century most other people in the world worked on the land and were exposed to the elements. This is no longer true for most people in the developed countries.

How skin changes with age

Changes in skin appearance

We all know that as we get older, there can be dramatic changes in the way our skin looks.

The reasons why the skin of a child looks so healthy (at least, before the teenage spots come) are that the epidermis is highly translucent, it works very efficiently, and it easily retains water.

More importantly, at this age there has been little or no obvious damage to the dermis



'Radiance' is the optical effect of light reflected from an undamaged dermis and well-organised epidermis. As we, age our skin, if well looked after and protected from the sun, may be preserved better than that of our peers. Higher levels of pigment in the skin help to protect it but are not a total safeguard.

[Table of Contents](#)[Previous Chapter](#)[Previous page](#)[Next page](#)[Next Chapter](#)[Index](#)

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Page 63 -- SKIN AND AGING

Table of
Contents

Previous
Chapter

Previous
page

Next
page

Next
Chapter

Index

from the effects of the sun (although this is the time when most of the damage is being done and its effects will start to become visible within a few years).

As we grow out of childhood our skin naturally changes. During the teenage years hormonal changes account for an increase in sebum secretion and the development of spots and acne. Later in life, this extreme hormone production declines.

As we age, the rate of loss of the old skin cells from the stratum corneum slows down.

As well as this, the epidermis gradually gets less translucent and does not retain water so well. All the skin functions take place more slowly in mature skin. In addition, as most of us have been exposed to the sun to a greater or lesser degree over many decades, the 'damage' to the dermis can now be seen even through the dry epidermis.

This is why older skin looks dry, less radiant and less plumped out. This affects all races, but those who deliberately avoid the sun will tend to preserve their skins for longer.

The rate at which our skin changes is dependent to some extent on what we inherited in the first place, how we treated it and how we looked after it. The effect of aging on skin is one of the features of skin that trouble us most. Our anxiety about its aspects has led to a whole industry setting out to prevent and correct the damage we do to ourselves over many years.

Intrinsic and extrinsic aging

Some of the skin changes that accompany aging are natural and inevitable, and together make up the process called **intrinsic aging** or sometimes **chronological aging**.

More significant for most people are the changes arising from external causes - called **extrinsic aging** - and in particular the damage caused by ultraviolet radiation from the sun and sun beds, known as **photoaging**.

Table of
Contents

Previous
Chapter

Previous
page

Next
page

Next
Chapter

Index

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Page 64 -- INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC AGING

[Table of Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Previous page](#)
[Next page](#)
[Next Chapter](#)
[Index](#)

These changes affect the dermis in particular and result from changes in the chemical structure of the collagen and elastin, and to the quality and quantity of proteins and natural acids in the skin.

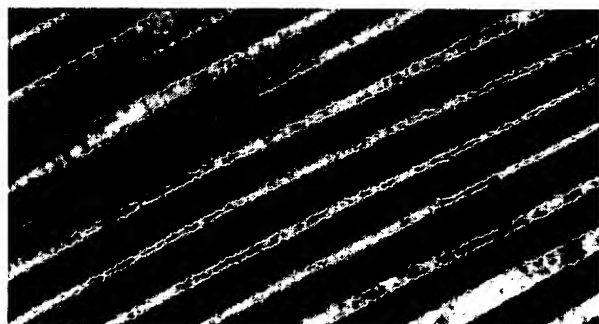
Understanding the changes that occur in the cells and layers of the skin with intrinsic and extrinsic aging will help us to understand why skin looks as it does, and how we can protect or alter this appearance. It also allows us to understand why it is so important to protect the skin of children and to educate them in skin care.

In **intrinsic aging**, the skin becomes thinner and loses much of its elasticity, while the normal expression lines deepen. The boundary between the epidermis and the dermis

is flattened, and the dermis starts to wither (atrophy). The number of blood vessels in the dermis begins to fall. At the same time the hair often loses its color, and within the skin there are fewer hair follicles and fewer sweat glands. The collagen, elastin and ground substance also decrease in amount, but the proteins remain in a reasonably stable state.

In **extrinsic aging** the epidermis thickens. The amounts of collagen and elastin increase, but the structures of these proteins become disorganised. Almost all of this is due to effects of radiation from the sun, known as **photodamage**.

- 'Intrinsic aging' happens inevitably.
- 'Extrinsic aging' is due to outside factors that have affected the skin.



The collagen network from (left) undamaged and (right) sun-damaged skins.

[Table of Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Previous page](#)
[Next page](#)
[Next Chapter](#)
[Index](#)

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